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# The Great Commission

## IS IT FOR THE CHURCH?

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Whether or not the Church is right in understanding that the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19, 20 was given her to obey would seem a strange question to raise after the Church Universal has used it for nearly nineteen centuries. But that question is being asked in some quarters today. After all, we should not be greatly astonished. For an age which has gone so far as to "deny the Lord that bought" us will certainly not hesitate to question a command which He gave. We cannot expect that baptism will be considered more sacred than the Lord who instituted it.

Down through centuries of doctrinal controversy, the Great Commission of our Lord has been a Gibraltar of defense against Arianism, Unitarianism, and all the others who deny the Triune God. In one sentence it names the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, without the slightest intimation that there is any essential difference in their Being. In fact, the oneness and equality of the three Persons is tacitly assumed by the very form and content of the command. The Great Commission is really the only *formal* statement of the Trinity our Lord ever uttered. It is at least the only one on record.

This fact may help to explain the determined assault made upon this passage by some of the ablest of the "destructive critics" whose purpose was to show it spurious, never spoken by the Lord, and therefore not properly an original part of Matthew's Gospel. From one standpoint the Christian may thank God for this attack, since it failed utterly and demonstrated that Matthew 28:19, 20 is a genuine part of the recorded teaching of our Lord. Now that the smoke of the battle has cleared away, it is not likely that any rep-

utable scholar of today, whether believing or unbelieving, will soon dispute the integrity of the passage.

More recently, however, an altogether different kind of attack has been made upon the Great Commission. This time it comes, not from the enemies of the Bible, but rather from its friends. We are told that, while this passage is a genuine part of the Scriptures, the Commission it contains is *not intended for the Church of this age!* This view may



appear quite novel to some, but it is not altogether new. It was advanced some years ago by an English teacher, now deceased, who did much service for the Truth but unfortunately held some very erroneous views such as Annihilationism and Soul-sleeping. A few teachers in this country have adopted his opinion on Matthew 28:19, 20, and are teaching it assiduously. We believe this attitude has a serious aspect and that we have a right to demand some real proof when asked to surrender a passage which has never been questioned as belonging to the Church until these last days. The proof submitted seems pitifully weak.

We are told that the Great Commission is not for the Church because it occurs in the Gospel of Matthew, and Matthew is the Gospel of the *Kingdom!* This is no proof

at all. We admit, and teach, that by every canon of internal evidence Matthew is the Gospel of the King and the Kingdom. But the King and the Kingdom were *rejected* at the Cross! And Matthew 28:19, 20 was spoken *after* the Cross! If any definite dividing line in Scripture is drawn between the Kingdom and the Church of this age, that line should be drawn at Calvary. The fact of the matter is that no hard and fast line can be drawn. The Church began on the Day of Pentecost but it certainly was in view as early as the 16th chapter of Matthew where the Lord first speaks of it as something to come.

It is remarkable in this connection that of the four Gospels, Matthew's alone speaks of the Church by name. If this Gospel written by Matthew is to be treated strictly and exclusively as the Gospel of the Kingdom, and we know that the Kingdom will not be ushered in until the return of Christ, then how shall we explain the presence in Matthew of the communion service which was ordained to be observed "*until he come*"? It is well known that many devout and brilliant students of the Bible have held that Matthew's Gospel is indeed in a special sense the Gospel of the Kingdom, but they have not felt the necessity therefore of tossing the Great Commission into the discard. Such unwarranted, unproven interpretations have never accomplished anything but to bring the Truth into disrepute and draw the scorn of opponents.

If we carry the inquiry further and ask when Christ intended His Great Commission to be carried out, if not by the Church of this age, we are told by some that we may look for its accomplishment in the *next* age when the Kingdom is in mani-

festation, or during the great tribulation immediately preceding the Kingdom. The first and most important answer to this is that such an interpretation is forced, unnatural, and arbitrary. Consider the situation when the Great Commission was spoken. It was given to the eleven apostles at some time during the fifty days between Christ's resurrection and the descent of the Spirit on Pentecost. Our Lord knew when He gave this command that these men to whom He gave it would be the first members of the Church. He told them specifically not to begin their work until the Day of Pentecost. On that day they were to begin their work, and they did. Now if the Great Commission in Matthew was not part of the work given to these men, why is there not some intimation of it? And why does the Lord say to *these men*, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations," if this was not to be done until these same men had been dead for over eighteen hundred years?

But there is a still more conclusive answer. That answer is written in the record of the apostles' labors. Did the apostles regard the Great Commission as their task, and did they obey it as they went forth? This will settle the question. Let us ascertain first just what the Great Commission commands. First, it commands the "making of disciples by teaching." This is the meaning of the word translated "teach." Second, it commands the baptism of those who are made disciples. Third, it commands instruction be given those who are made disciples and are baptized. Let us take now the first and most important part of the Commission and ask whether the apostles obeyed it in their work. Did they teach men in order to make disciples? Let us see.

Acts 5:42 declares of the apostles that "daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ." And the next verse (6:1) informs us of the result: "In those days . . . the number of the disciples was multiplied"! They were obeying the Great Commission—making disciples by teaching.

In the sixth chapter of Acts we find the apostles appointing seven men to oversee the "daily ministration" in order that the apostles might give themselves to the "ministry of the Word." What was the result? "The word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multi-

plied" (6:7). They were "making disciples" by teaching the Word.

Acts 11:26 informs us that Paul and Barnabas spent a whole year at Antioch where they "taught much people," and further that "the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch." They are still "making disciples by teaching."

But the most convincing passage is Acts 14:21 which gives an account of the work of Paul and Barnabas at Derbe. They "preached the gospel to that city, and . . . taught many." Here the very same Greek verb is used that occurs in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19! The A. S. V. translates it "made many disciples." The Lord had said, "Go . . . and make disciples." Paul went and "made many disciples"! Could anything possibly be plainer than that the apostle was obeying the Great Commission? According to some modern interpreters, he was not working in harmony with the purpose of God in "making disciples." Paul and his associates should have known better! What foolishness! Who is the best judge of whether Matthew 28:19, 20 is for the Church or not? Paul, or a few men living nineteen hundred years afterward? Perhaps the most amusing aspect of the whole controversy is that Paul obeyed the Great Commission over a period of at least thirty years before ever Matthew had recorded it in His Gospel! Yet we are told that it is not for the Church because it is found in this Gospel!

If the Church has made any mistake, it has not been in regarding the Great Commission as given to her, but rather in doing so little to obey it in the power of her risen, glorified Lord. What we need above all else today is more New Testament evangelism—which is the winning of men to Christ by teaching them. That is the great task of the Church in this age. You cannot make disciples for the Lord Jesus without teaching, for a disciple is literally "an instructed man."

### WHY THE DIFFERENCE?

The burglary insurance rate is \$12 a thousand in Boston, \$22 in New York, and \$27.50 in Chicago. Is there any connection between these figures and the fact that the Bible has been read daily in the public schools in Boston for 65 years, for 22 years in New York, and excluded for 30 years from the schools of Chicago?—*The Gideon*.